

Look after Yourself Happily

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Ajaan Suwat used to point out there are so many areas where the Buddha talks about not-self, but there are also areas where he talks about self—as in the chant just now: “I’m the owner of my actions.” You don’t say, “My actions are not-self,” or, “The actor is not-self.” You take responsibility for your actions. There’s also the passage where we say, “May I look after myself with ease,” which can also be translated, “May I be happy looking after myself.” In other words, may you do a good job of looking after your happiness.

Buddhism is one of the few religions where they don’t make you feel embarrassed about wanting to be happy. It’s right up front. The question is, How do you do it? How do you find your happiness? Because we also take into consideration that thought, “May all living beings look after themselves with ease.” We don’t want our search for happiness to get in the way of their true happiness.

Now this sometimes may involve getting in the way of some things that they’d may like us to do, or of some things they want out of us that we don’t feel are really appropriate or in our best interest. But not following their wishes is not harming them. When you really harm people is when you get them to do things that are unskillful. So we take on ourselves the desire that we won’t do that as we look after ourselves.

So how do you look after yourself? You look after yourself by being generous, by being virtuous, and by meditating. These are things that are all in your best interest. Even the contemplation of not-self: The Buddha says you do that because it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. So there’s no place where he says there is no self.

There’s that famous questionnaire where he asks, starting with the body or form, “Is it constant or inconstant?” “Inconstant.” “If something is inconstant is it stressful or easeful?” “Stressful.” “And if something is inconstant and stressful, is it worth calling your self or identifying as yours?” Notice he’s not coming to the conclusion that there is no self. He comes simply to the conclusion, is it worth it?

Because your sense of self is an activity, something you do. The Buddha calls it “I-making and my-making.” And you look through the Canon there are areas where the Buddha says it really is in your interest to be skillful in your I-making and my-making.

In the same way, you want to be skillful in figuring out what is not-self. In other words, there are some areas where, if you deny that you're responsible, you're actually doing something unskillful. There are also areas where you look after yourself and it's part of the path.

There's one passage where the Buddha talks about the self as a governing principle. When you're feeling tempted to leave the practice, ask yourself, "I got on this path because I wanted to put an end to suffering. If I get off this path, would it be appropriate? If I go back to doing things I was doing before, or sometimes worse, would it be appropriate?" If you love yourself, no.

There's also a passage where Ven. Ananda talks about the need for conceit. And his term for conceit doesn't mean pride so much as it simply means a sense of who-you-are in comparison to other people: better or worse or equal. In this case, you're trying to put yourself on a par, "There are other people who have gained awakening. They're human beings, I'm a human being. They can do it, why can't I?"

So these are skillful activities of creating a self. At the same time, there are skillful ways of applying the perception of not-self, when you realize you don't want to hold onto something unskillful.

But both self and not-self are there as strategies for happiness. You identify what you want, what you hope to attain, in the sense that *you* will enjoy it. And then you look at what capabilities you've got in order to get that. You might call it the self as the consumer and the self as the producer or the provider. You apply not-self to anything that would get in the way of what you really want. These are activities we have to use in order to go through life, to figure out what we should hold on to and what we should let go of as we look for happiness. Because there are things that we will have to sacrifice if we want a really reliable happiness.

So these are our motivations for practicing generosity, virtue and meditation: our sense that we'll benefit from them and that we have the ability to do them. You want to maintain those all the way to the last steps of the path.

Then, once you've reached the end of the path and you've found the ultimate happiness, there's nothing you have to do in order to maintain it. That's when you can put your senses of self and not-self aside. You pick them up occasionally as you continue to live. Arahants know, when they're eating, whose mouth to put the food in. But they wear these concepts in a different way from us.

But in the meantime we've got to learn how to use these concepts to look after ourselves.

This is one of the reasons why we're sitting here meditating. We're looking after the mind, providing it with a sense of well-being in the present moment,

because when you have that well-being it's a lot easier to look at some of your old habits and realize you don't want to engage in them anymore: your old unskillful habits, the ones that are either harmful to yourself or harmful to other people, and that when you're in a bad mood you tend to hold on to.

So one of the purposes of the meditation is, as the Buddha said, to give you a pleasant dwelling, in other words, a good place to stay right here. When we have a sense of well-being here, then the need to look for well-being in unskillful ways gets less and less immediate, less and less pressing, and less and less desirable. You realize you've got something good here, so why throw it away? So try to maintain this sense of ease and well-being as best you can.

One of the problems about meditating is that we hear, well, there's another step and then there's another step and there's another step, and we get impatient to get up the stairs. Especially when we realize we only have little bit of time, we want to get through this as quickly as possible. But the mind, as Ajaan Fuang used to say, has its rhythms. Sometimes it needs some time just to rest with that sense of well-being, especially if you've been suffering or totally worn out or stressed out. The mind needs to rest; it needs to take its time. Just as you can't get eight hours of sleep in one hour, you can't get the benefits of eight hours of meditation in one hour. So however long it takes for the mind to have enough rest, you have to let it rest. But it's not wasted time. One, the mind does get healed in a lot of ways. And two, it does require a certain amount of insight and discernment in order to protect your concentration.

Once the mind gets still, then you can see the other currents of the mind and see where they're flowing. It's like being in a train station. Sometimes you sit in a train and you look over and see there's another train moving, and you're not sure if you're moving or it's moving. But then all of a sudden you see a post go by and you realize, "Okay, we're the ones who are moving." The mind needs a post. It needs a reference point in order to see its movements. So you give it this reference point by saying, "I'm going to stay here with the breath. This is going to be my frame of reference."

When there's a sense of ease, let it fill the body. Let your awareness fill the body. And then just stay there, look after it, tend to it. That's your post. If something else moves in the mind, you see it. If you're moving all the time, you don't see the movements of other things. Say you're on a train going through a countryside. You look out and everything seems to be moving: The trees move, the mountains move, cars move, people move, animals move, because you're moving. But as for what's actually staying still and what's moving fast, what's moving slowly, you can't tell. You've got to stop. Then you can see.

So don't feel that the time spent in maintaining your concentration is wasted. You can put it to good use to learn a lot of things about the mind, things that are all useful for your happiness. Because it's these little movements of the mind that can disturb you, and they can take hold and then turn from little things into big things. You want to catch them when they're still small. If they're unskillful, you can breathe through them and analyze them when they haven't gotten too big, when you're still stepping outside of them. If they're skillful things, you want to maintain them, so you want to learn how to recognize them when they're still small.

In this way, the stillness of a mind has its uses, which means that it is okay to be there with a sense of well-being and allow it to spread around. Now, don't take the well-being as your object. It's going to be the side-effect of the breath, the side-effect of your staying with the breath. Look after the causes, and the effects will take care of themselves. But don't be afraid to maintain the causes simply for the sake of getting the mind a place to rest, a place to gather its strength, to heal its wounds, because it's all part of the path.

As the mind begins to feel that it's had enough of concentration, okay, you know there's work to be done and you can put it to work. If, in doing the work, things start getting unclear, go back to the concentration. The Buddha calls it a home for the mind. So get used to living at home. There are times when you may have to leave it, or when you have to do work in your home, but you want this to be the default place where you stay, for the sake of your long-term welfare and happiness.